

Servicescape Factors Which Influence Tourists' Behavioral Intentions to Repeat Visits to Horse-Based Tourism Attractions in Texas

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ABSTRACT

A popular attraction in Texas is a horse attraction, including county and state fairs, horse races, horse shows, horse tours, rodeo and livestock shows, and trail drives/rides (Office of the Governor, Economic Development & Tourism, 2010). The purpose of this study will be (a) to understand the under-explored area of tourists' perception of the servicescape in horse-based tourism; (b) to investigate tourists' perceived quality of the impact of the servicescape on emotions; and (c) to examine the relationships among perceived servicescape, emotions and behavioral intentions of visitors to horseback riding attractions in Texas.

The findings of the study will provide information to horse-based service providers/tourism attractions and contribute to the development, operations, and marketing strategies of horse-based tourism.

Key Words: *horse-based tourism, servicescape, emotions, behavioral intentions, Structural Equation Modeling (SEM)*

INTRODUCTION

Throughout the world, one of the fastest growing tourism niche markets is sport tourism (Lala & Bhat, 2008). Within this niche market, a popular sport is horseback riding which is a nature-based tourism activity (Auchter, 2008; Brown, 2003; Daniels, & Norman, 2005; Helgadottir, 2006; Konyves, & Suta, 2006). Because horse-attraction visitors spend time in the

physical surroundings, Brown (2003) reported that “horse-attraction visitors tended to stay longer at a destination than other sports-related attraction visitors stayed.”

The visitors’ reactions to the servicescape may play an important role in whether they are satisfied, and whether they intend to repeat their visit to the horse riding attraction (Bitner, 1992; Hightower, Brady, & Baker, 2002; Wakefield & Blodgett, 1996). Common horse-based attractions in Texas are horseback riding ranches, guest ranches, dude ranches, equestrian centers, county and state fairs, horse races, horse shows, horse tours, rodeo and livestock shows, and trail drives/rides (Office of the Governor, Economic Development & Tourism [OGEDT], 2010). Unlike other leisure sports’ studies, however, the research related to tourists’ perception and their behaviors toward the servicescape at horseback riding attractions is very limited.

The purpose of this study is to examine the perceived quality of the servicescape at horseback riding attractions in Texas, and to investigate the impact of the servicescape at the horseback riding attractions on the emotions of visitors and their intention to revisit.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Horse-based tourism in Texas

Estimates show that “186 million domestic visitors traveled to Texas in 2009 and the total direct travel spending reached \$51.8 billion” (OGEDT, 2010). Tourism is a major contributor and expanding economic activity in Texas (OGEDT, 2010).

A popular attraction in Texas is a horse attraction, including county and state fairs, horse races, horse shows, horse tours, rodeo and livestock shows, and trail drives/rides (OGEDT, 2010). Therefore, the majority of horses in Texas are used and trained for the purpose of leisure, such as hunting, events, shows, sport, rodeo, and pleasure (Auchter, 2008). Horse-based tourism attracts visitors who participate in activities and educational riding programs (Brown, 2003). An important attraction to Texas as a destination in horse-based tourism; the market for horse-based tourism continues to expand.

However, little studies on horse-based tourism in Texas have been done. Therefore, investigating the characteristics and tourism behavior intention of the horse-based tourism will be meaningful and useful to contribute to the development of Texas horse-based tourism and industry. Due to the features of horse-based tourism, there is a need to understand whether the tourists are satisfied with the destination, and which factors related to this satisfaction have an influence on repeat visits to the horse ranches/centers in Texas.

The effect of the servicescape on tourists’ behavioral intentions

As the importance of customers’ behavioral responses to the physical surroundings increases, research related to the physical environment, servicescape, (Bitner, 1992) has been conducted in service industries such as tourism (Bitner, 1992; Hightower et al., 2002; Wakefield & Blodgett, 1996).

The studies of the leisure tourism found that servicescape factors (e.g., ambient conditions, layout, signs, symbols, artifacts, etc) were mediated by the emotional states of visitors, such as pleasure and arousal, and had an effect on their behavioral intentions (Bitner, 1992; Hightower et al., 2002; Zeithaml, Berry, & Parasuraman, 1996).

Mehrabian and Russell’s model (1974) showed that environmental factors affect individuals’ emotional states, such as pleasure, arousal, and dominance. The environmental

factors are external to customers and composed of a variety of factors in the physical environment (Bagozzi, 1986). The process (servicescape and emotions) has an effect on the last stage of the model which is behaviors or responses of customers (Bagozzi, 1986). In other words, the level of the emotions elicited by hedonic environments (e.g., servicescape) determines customers' satisfaction and behavioral intentions (Wakefield & Blodgett, 1996).

METHOD

Instrument development

A survey instrument will be developed based on a review of the related literature. First, the survey will include demographic questions, the servicescape scale (twenty eight items) adopted from Bitner (1992), and Hightower et al. (2002), emotional state (eight items), such as pleasure and arousal adopted from Mehrabian and Russell (1974), and behavioral intention (ten items) adopted from Zeithaml et al. (1996).

A pilot test will assess validity and reliability of measurements of the instrument; procedures will be pilot tested to improve the process of data collection. After the pilot test, the modified survey questionnaires will be used to collect and analyze data for the study.

Sampling and data collection

The study will focus on horse-related attractions where the visitor participates (rides) such as horseback riding ranches, guest ranches, dude ranches, equestrian centers, as well as spectator horse-related attractions such as state fairs, horse races, horse shows, horse tours, and rodeo and livestock shows. The subjects of this study will be horse-based tourists who participate in the sport and those who are spectators. Horse-related attractions will be randomly selected from each of the seven tourism regions in Texas. The study will be conducted at the horse-based attractions using the intercept survey method.

In order to analyze the results of this study, descriptive data analysis, Confirmatory factor analysis, Preliminary analysis of measurement items (One-way ANOVA), and Measurement Model (Cronbach's alpha, confirmatory factor loading, and the average variance extracted) will be employed. Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) will be used to test this study. Approximately two hundred responses from the selected horseback riding ranches, guest ranches, dude ranches, and equestrian centers are targeted.

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